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TAPESTRY

OF

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

REPRESENTING

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE

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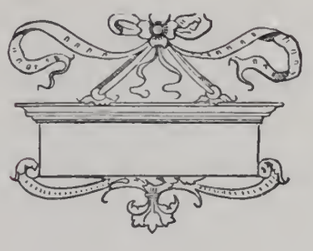
REPRESENTING

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE

WITH THE ARMS OF GUILLAUME DE HELLANDE
BISHOP-COUNT OF BEAUVAIS



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In the immense and magnificent artistic treasure of France, if there is an incomparable series of which our historians, our savants, our archeologists and all the enlightened minds of the country, may well be proud, it is surely that of the admirable collections of tapestries in the possession of our old Gothic Cathedrals. In the first rank among these collections, which are so justly admired, is that of the Cathedral of Beauvais, a portion of which tapestries, representing the history of St. Peter and St. Paul, was woven by the foremost artists of the XVth century and presented to the ancient and admirable Church by one of its Bishops, Guillaume de Hellande.

It is one of these tapestries, representing the Martyrdom of St. Paul, that we are about to describe and of which we shall endeavour to narrate the history.

I

As St. Paul was being led to the spot where he was to be put to death, we read in the Golden Legend[1], he met, at the gates of the town, Platilla, who had been one of his disciples. She approached him and implored his protection in his prayers. And Paul said to her : " I salute thee, Platilla, lend me the veil that covers thy head, so that I may bind my eyes and I will restore it to thee afterwards ".

1. Jacques de Voragine : *Légende dorée*, édition 1843, page 308. This narrative was taken by Voragine from the apocryphal epistle of St. Denis to Timothy and from the Passion Books of St. Paul and St. Peter, attributed to St. Lin.

The executioner, overhearing him, grinned and said : " Lend this impostor, this magician, the veil he asks of thee, it is not so precious that thou canst regret losing it. "

When Paul reached the spot where he was to be put to death, he turned to the East and having stretched out his hands prayed for a long time. Then, bidding farewell to his brethren, he placed Platilla's veil over his eyes, knelt down and was decapitated.

As his head fell, he uttered the name of Jesus.... According to several authors, his head, which the executioner had cut off with his glaive, is said to have rebounded three times, and at each bound it caused a spring of running water to rise from the spot that it touched, whence came the name of " Three Fountains " given to the spot where the martyrdom took place.

That is the way in which, during the Middle Ages, the death of the Apostle of the Gentiles was related, and, in commenting this text of the Golden Legend, the artist composed the cartoon for the tapestry, a reproduction of which is to be seen at the beginning of these Notes.

In gothic letters, on a bandrol at the upper extremity of the tapestry, is the following inscription : " *Comment St. Pol a esté décolé hors Rome : la teste séparée du corps fist trois saulx.* " (How St. Paul was beheaded outside of the city of Rome : his head, separated from the trunk, rebounded three times.)

St. Paul is in the foreground, in the centre, kneeling, in profile, turned towards the right, with joined hands and clad in a widefolded scarlet robe. His head, detached from the

body, has already touched the earth twice, and on the spots where it fell, the soil is seen to open slightly and the water to gush out of the aperture.

The head is in front of the body, facing it. The hair is thrown back from the forehead; the beard is thick and pointed; the eyes are covered with Platilla's veil which is tied over the left ear. The lips are half open and, before them, standing out in dark green on the light green earth, are the letters I. H. S., the name of Jesus which again issued forth from the mouth when the head touched the earth for the third time.

Above is a bandrol with the following words taken from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians : " Michi vivere Christus est et mori lucrum. " (In life, I tried to glorify Christ. To die for Him is gain.)

Behind St. Paul and also in the foreground is the executioner who holds in both hands the broad, long and heavy sword, lowered towards earth after the hard blow given St. Paul and which completely detached his head from his body.

The executioner contemplates with a sottish and cynical look the Saint he has just put to death. His face is bestial; his eyes are starting from their sockets and are lined with paddings of flesh; he has an enormous, arched nose which resembles the beak of a bird of prey; a broad chin, the jaw-bone of an animal and a mouth slit beyond all measure, showing teeth — similar to those of the ogre as pictured in children's tales — complete his brutish physiognomy.

He wears a white turban on his head, and he is garbed in a very short green and yellow jerkin, tightened at the

waist with a leather belt, from which hang a cutlass and a purse in which the executioner places the money he receives for his work. He has tight small-clothes, faint red in colour, and soft leather boots of a tawny hue.

Behind are fifteen personages disposed in two distinct groups; the pagans on one side, the Christians on the other.

The group of pagans, on the left, comprises nine personages, the central figure being Emperor Nero. He is facing us, arrayed in rich golden armour with beautifully chased ornamentations. His hair is long and smooth and worn in the style adopted later on by the Kings of France, Louis XI and Charles VIII. He is beardless, and on his forehead is a laurel wreath.

Although he has a full face, it is rather long, and he does not resemble the type popularized by busts and by medals bearing his effigy. He assists unmoved at the beheading of the Saint and on his physiognomy is an expression of complete unconcern.

His right hand is leaning on the shoulder of one of his councillors, a statesman of the political and civil order with a fat face and sceptical features that denote an egotistic voluptuary.

This personage, tall and very stout, wears a high cap and is clothed in a rich, wide robe edged with furs and ornamented with large blue impressive designs which stand out on a yellow ground. He advances his right hand in the attitude of a person discussing and who, in his arguments, backs up his words with gestures. With his left hand he is gathering up his robe and at the same time holding a

scroll of paper — probably the death warrant of St. Paul, at whose execution he has just assisted.

On Nero's right hand is another important personage, but of the military order. He has a thin face and is clean shaven; his round nose form with an advancing chin what is called in expressive terms " nut-crackers ".

This individual is turning towards the Emperor whom he salutes by raising his scarlet coloured cap and from whom he demands his orders. In his left hand is a case in the shape of a small stick, with an opening at the extremity, a sort of box in which decrees, or military roll-calls, are placed. He is wearing a light-coloured jerkin, which a belt makes tight-fitting at the waist.

Behind these principal persons of distinction are two others, both bearded; they wear turbans and long robes. Next, come three warriors with beardless faces, wearing helmets or red caps; in their hands, all three have a hastated arm : partisan, halberd and trident.

The second group, that of the Christians, is to be seen in the portion of the composition that is on the right; it comprises six personages in an attitude of prayer and meditation. They have come with feelings of pity and a sentiment of faith to assist at the execution of the Apostle of whom they proclaim themselves the disciples.

Among them is a woman wearing a poppy coloured hood — doubtlessly Platilla. — She is draped in a long blue dress; her hands are joined; she has a steady look; she is profoundly moved and is wholly intent on her prayer.

The principal personage is an old man, around whom are assembled the other Christians. He his bald-headed

and he has a long beard. His head is inclined on one side and his arms are folded on his breast. He is clothed in a long blue robe and is contemplating the head of St. Paul in a respectful attitude.

On his left is a bearded Christian wearing a turban, in profile, with his hands folded and with his eyes looking towards heaven in a state of ecstacy.

A short distance behind him another Christian, with a beard, wearing a very high cap, whose head only is to be seen, raises a hand as if to wipe away his tears.

Behind the principal personage, on his left, we perceive a veil which, doubtlessly, indicates the presence of a woman entirely hidden by the personages in the foreground.

By their attitude and their physiognomy all the Christians express pity, meditation and emotion; we feel that a powerful religious character detaches itself from the *ensemble* of their groups.

Above, in the clouds, is the Eternal, portrayed as a man, bearded and very aged, with a crown on his head, holding in his left hand the orb of the universe surmounted by a cross, whilst with his right hand, he is bestowing a blessing on the soul of St. Paul which two angels, who are seen flying, carry towards him on a scarf which they are holding at each extremity.

The soul is represented by a nude figure, of neither sex, facing us and standing, with hands joined, in an attitude of prayer. Only the upper part of the body, above the waist, is apparent, proceeding from the scarf held by the angels.

II

The tapestry is in the Franco-Flemish style. Its composition reminds one very much of certain incunabula wood-engravings, principally those in the books printed in Paris or in Flanders at the epoch of Louis XI and of Charles VIII.

This tapestry measures 109 $^1/_2$ in. in height, by 78 $^3/_4$ in. in width.

It bears the inscription " Peace ", repeated eight times on bandrols, and, in the four angles, two escutcheons alternate : that of the Bishops-Counts of Beauvais which is *or* a cross gules cantoned into four keys gules; and that of Guillaume de Hellande, of which the first and fourth are *argent* a band gules charged with six *fers* of golden axes, which are the arms of Hellande; in the third, *or* a cross gules thereon sixteen azure *alerions*, which are the arms of Montmorency-Beausault, charged in the *cœur* with the coat of arms of Clermont de Nesle which is gules two bends *adossés d'or semé* with trefoil of the same.

If we examine the point of the tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Paul we remark that it is of quite a particular fineness.

The faces are especially well handled with a sobriety of tones which produces a great effect.

The composition is simple and not at all confused. The personages stand out well one from the other. The two groups — that of the pagans and that of the Christians — are to be seen quite distinct and yet the main subject, the Martyrdom of St. Paul, and its consequence — the miracle of the apparition of the springs — dominates the whole scene and retains our attention.

We must also admire the brilliancy and the diversity of the colours, the richness of the ornaments and the scenery, the brilliant stuffs, the furs, and the jewellery set with precious stones.

From a decorative point of view — and tapestry is, first and foremost, an object of decoration, — this specimen is altogether superior.

III

The history of this tapestry is in no way surpassed by its artistic beauty.

On July 22nd 1443, Guillaume de Hellande, at first a canon and then archdeacon of the Cathedral of Beauvais, was appointed Bishop of that town in place of the famous Cauchon who sentenced Joan of Arc to be burnt alive.

Now, on the preceding first of June, a truce, suspending the war which the French were carrying on against the English, and which, on account of its duration, has been called the Hundred Years' War, had just been agreed upon at Tours, between the King of France Charles VII and the King of England Henry VI.

Guillaume de Hellande considered this peace, concluded on his accession to the episcopal seat, as a particular blessing from heaven on his nomination to the Bishopric. Consequently he wished to leave a public memorial of the satisfaction he felt by giving to the Cathedral, of which he had just been appointed Bishop, a series of tapestries of great value.

In order to recall the circumstances which were

the cause of his making the gift, on each tapestry, the compositions are strewn with small bandrols on which the word " Peace " is to be seen, that word recalling the truce of 1443.

Here is, furthermore, the way in which a chronicle of the epoch relates the deeds in rhyme :

En l'an de grâce 1400 et 44,
En tous sens
Dieu modéra notre souffrance.
Trèves furent faites en France,
Entre le puissant roi français,
Appelé Charles le septiesme
Et Henry roi d'Angleterre
Au doux mois de mai que la terre
Se pare de maintes couleurs.
Au dict an Maître Guillaume de Hellande
Fut fait évêque de Beauvais
Et l'an 1460 fit faire, de bonne durée,
Ces tapisseries où sont figurées
La belle vie de Saint Pierre.

(In the year of Grace 1400 and 44
In all ways
God moderated our sufferings.
Truces were concluded in France,
Between the powerful French King,
Called Charles the Seventh
And Henry King of England
In the sweet month of May when the earth.

Adorns herself in many colours.
In that said year Master Guillaume de Hellande
Was made Bishop of Beauvais
And in the year 1460 he had made, to be of long duration,
These tapestries on which are depicted
The beautiful life of St. Peter.)

Besides, in a codicil to his will, Guillaume de Hellande declares that he presented these tapestries to the Cathedral and, on his tombstone in the choir, included in the epitaph, the following words may be read : " *ornamenta dedit meditus tapeta, discos.* "

Who was this Guillaume de Hellande who was called to the episcopal seat of Beauvais? Here are a few details we have brought to light about him.

Guillaume de Hellande came of an old Norman family from the district of Caux.

In the thirteenth century, the *seigneurs* of Hellande and of Lambreville were foremost among the knights who fought beside the Kings of France, Philippe de Valois, Jean le Bon, and Charles VI, against the English during the Hundred Years' War.

Guillaume, canon, then archdeacon and finally Bishop-Count of Beauvais and a French peer, was the son of Robert de Hellande, a knight whose prowess on several occasions against the English is cited.

His mother was Jeanne de Montmorency-Beausault. His father, Robert, was the son of Jean II and of Isabeau de Neelle d'Offemont. Guillaume de Hellande, therefore, sprung from the noblest of French families.

As a peer of France, he occupied a seat as judge at the trial of the duc d'Alençon, and, as Bishop of Beauvais, was one of the leading witnesses at the rehabilitation trial of Joan of Arc.

He succeeded Pierre Cauchon who presided the Tribunal that had received orders to condemn the heroine. He declared that he disassociated himself entirely from the acts of his predecessor and he gave important evidence in favour of Joan of Arc [1].

We do not know how many pieces formed the series of tapestries presented by Guillaume de Hellande to the Cathedral. But their number must have been considerable for they covered the walls of the choir [2].

Among the pieces of tapestry which are to-day lost or destroyed, was one in which Guillaume de Hellande was pictured. He was portrayed as a Bishop, kneeling before St. Peter, with his mitre on his head, his cope on his shoulders, his crosier on his arm, and his hands joined. A phylactery came forth from his mouth and the following words were to be read on it :

A toi, ce tapis je présente
Pour ton église décorer
Et ton saint nom honorer davantage.

1. See La Chenays des Bois : *Dictionnaire de la noblesse de France*, at the word " Hellande ".

Gallia Christiana : vol. II, page 137.

Quicherat : *Procès de réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc*, vol. II, pages 133, 213; vol. III, pages 228, 235, 253, 254, 355.

2. *Inventaire de 1472 dressé par Thomas Tulleu, chanoine et notaire de la Cathédrale de Beauvais.*

(To Thee, this tapestry I present
Thy Church to ornament
And the more to honour Thy holy name.)

The successors of Guillaume de Hellande deemed it an honour to look after and keep these admirable tapestries in good condition. Thus, we know that the chapter of the Cathedral of Beauvais ordered, in 1467, a large chest to be purchased to put away the tapestries given by the Bishop; and, in 1486, we learn that they were taken down and beaten[1].

From that date onwards we find nothing more about them, only we known that before the Revolution, at a date we cannot give with precision, several of the tapestries in question had already been taken from the Treasure, among the number being two tapestries which, in 1787, were the property of Abbé Auxcousteaux, canon of the Church of St. Barthelemy.

At the present day, we know of nine tapestries of the series presented to the Cathedral of Beauvais by Guillaume de Hellande.

One of these tapestries never left the Treasure; four others, withdrawn in 1793, were safely kept at the Prefecture of the Oise department until 1844, at which date they were restored to the Cathedral.

In that same year the tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Paul, which we have just described, was in the possession of a very learned archeologist, M. Mansard, a descendant

1. Docteur Victor Leblond : *Inventaire sommaire de la Collection Bucquet-Auxcouteaux*, Paris, sans date, in-8°, page 95.

of the illustrious architects of the same name, and a manufacturer at Voisinlieu. M. Mansard followed the example set by the General Council of the Oise department and, by a meritorious act of generosity, restored to the Cathedral the admirable tapestry which was formerly in his possession.

Since then, by virtue of the law called Separation of the Church and of the State, the representatives of M. Mansard asked for the tapestry to be returned to them; a judgment was pronounced in favour of their application and it is they who have just disposed of it.

In addition to the five tapestries which we have just mentioned and which are, at the present time, in the Treasure of the Cathedral of Beauvais, there is one which M. Dusommerard was able to acquire, about eighty years ago, and which is now in the Cluny Museum, Paris.

Finally, the last two tapestries which, in 1787, were in the possession of canon Auxcousteaux, were, in 1855, the property of M. Peaucelle. Unfortunately, they were in a fragmentary condition for pieces had been torn away and they had been cut and patched up in order to fit on walls too small for their dimensions.

A great deal has been written about all these tapestries[1] with the exception of the Martyrdom of St. Paul which has thus acquired a sort of virginity that increases its value and heightens the interest it offers to savants, amateurs and persons who collect artistic treasures.

1. Achille Jubinal : *Les tapisseries historiées*, grand volume in-folio oblong, Paris, 1838; dans le tome II des Mémoires de la Société académique de l'Oise : Article de l'Abbé Barraud, p. 165. Voir aussi Abbé Santerre : *Notice sur les tapisseries de la cathédrale de Beauvais*, in-8°, Clermont, sans date.

It is also very interesting to remark that in the two tapestries which, in the XVIIIth century, were in the possession of canon Auxcousteaux, one represented the Apparition of St. Peter and St. Paul, after their death, to Nero. On this tapestry, the Emperor is pictured seated on his throne with the same physiognomy, the same laurel wreath, the same head-dress and the same golden armour as in the tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Paul.

He is again portrayed in absolutely the same manner in one of the tapestries representing the Martyrdom of St. Peter, at the present time in the Treasure of the Cathedral of Beauvais. This tapestry has some analogy with that of the Martyrdom of St. Paul which we are now reviewing.

In the upmost part is the Eternal, receiving the soul of St. Peter in the same manner as in the one we are describing he receives the soul of St. Paul. Emperor Nero is pictured in the midst of a group of pagans, who are again represented as we have just indicated and, on the other side of St. Peter, crucified head downwards, is a group of Christians.

Thus, the composition in both tapestries has, in design and general arrangement, many points of ressemblance. But what makes one quite distinctive from the other and places the Martyrdom of St. Paul far above that of St. Peter, is the fact that the latter is no longer but the central part of a large tapestry the two sides of which must each have depicted subjects quite as important as the one that subsists.

On the contrary, the tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Paul is intact, no part of it is missing; it is even in a

remarkable state of preservation and endowed with a captivating freshness of colouring.

Thus, we have shown that the tapestry of the Martyrdom of St. Paul is one of the finest of the XVth century. It has a most interesting historical origin and it formed part of the Treasure of one of the most beautiful Churches in the world.

It is therefore an incomparable work of art on account of its beauty, its state of preservation and its history.

PARIS
IMP. LAHURE